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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

ESSAYS.

WE have been told by one of our critical weeklies that Francis Thompson's "Shelley"* is not criticism. Perhaps not; if one is willing to exclude all Pater's criticism of poetry and art and all Swinburne's prose and nearly all interpretative analysis of poets by kindred minds, all Lamb's notes on the Elizabethans and all Coleridge's, then we can exclude the wonderful, illuminating essay of the great poet, just deceased, upon his great predecessor. Otherwise we must admit it to be, as the Hon. George Wyndham says in the Preface, the most important contribution to pure letters written in English during the last twenty years. Arnold's "Essays in Criticism," he says, did not reach such heights, and the only work he finds for comparison is Myers's "Virgil." Perhaps Pater's "Renaissance" might have been compared with it, but that it stands outside the pale of the twenty years.

No poet more than Shelley needs another poet to stand between him and the gaping multitudes; his ways were not as their ways, nor were his thoughts their thoughts. He took no note of their limitations, but went singing along his seraph way, speaking as if all men were angels now and heaven had already descended to earth. This aloofness from the world and its affairs the late Francis Thompson understands as only a kindred soul can, and he sets forth the explanation in a prose as rich and colored, as luminous and finely wrought, as the highest poetry could be and yet without ever falling into the method or rhythm of poetry.

The essay, originally offered to the "Dublin Review" twenty years ago, was rejected by an editor whose name is wisely withheld and left to drift down the black hallways of oblivion and

* "Shelley." By Francis Thompson. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909.

ignominy with those of the densest of the Edinburgh reviewers. Had the wonderful essay been accepted, who can foretell how much lustrous and illuminative interpretation might have sprung from the same inexhaustible source? This exquisite bit was saved by Mr. Wilfred Meynell and Mr. Ward, and its publication swiftly sent the "Dublin Review" into a second edition, and the continued demand for the essay brought forth the present slim little volume. Together with the Swinburne essays on Shelley, it forms the most complete and perfect commentary on Shelley the poet and Shelley the man. But apart from its inestimable value as criticism and interpretation, it is an incomparable jewel of English prose, a veritable masterpiece.

There is but a modicum of valuable criticism in the world, and criticism which is at once constructive, minute and scholarly has hardly increased in England since the days of Arnold's "Essays in Criticism," Pater's "Appreciations" and Myers's "Virgil." Beside these classics one may, with perfect assurance, set Mr. Mackail's "Springs of Helicon,"* a volume which stands first in a projected cycle treating of the progress of English poetry, the subject which this poet and critic has chosen to deal with during his tenure of the chair of poetry in Oxford. The gain to all English readers will be incalculable if Mr. Mackail carries out his plan to the end, for he, of all men living, can, to adapt his own words, "make the office of criticism an interpretation of art in much the same way that art is an interpretation of life."

Those who from the beginning have followed Mr. Mackail's career know him the more able to enter into the poet's mind and art that he was, before he became a critic, a notable poet himself, and there are few students of poetry who have not learned to set his initials to the more exquisite poems in a rare and exquisite little volume called "Love in Idleness," which appeared in Oxford at the very beginning of the wonderful eighties of the last century. Perhaps the flow of poetic inspiration was too thin and intermittent, perhaps the age was not suited to the growth of poets; but, at any rate, those who watched and waited

* "The Springs of Helicon." By J. W. Mackail. Sometime Fellow of Balliol College, Professor of Poetry in the University of Oxford. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1909.